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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CARACAS 002173

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/13/2017
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [SCUL](#) [VE](#)
SUBJECT: WEAK TURNOUT FOR OPPOSITION "NO" MARCH,
ANTI-REFORM SECTORS REMAIN DIVIDED

REF: CARACAS 02142 AND PREVIOUS

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Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR ROBERT R. DOWNES
FOR REASON 1.4 (D)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: The November 11 march convoked by opposition parties advocating voting "No" in the December 2 constitutional referendum failed to generate a significant show of public support. Turnout for the event was likely hurt by a fractured anti-reform movement, recent well attended student-led demonstrations, and because of funeral services for former president Luis Herrera Campins. University student leaders affiliated with opposition parties participated in the day's events, but continued to advocate for postponement of the referendum. The student movement's position highlights the difficulty of reconciling the different positions that characterize the anti-reform movement. END SUMMARY.

Modest Showing

¶2. (SBU) Opposition political parties (Un Nuevo Tiempo, Primero Justicia, COPEI, the Radical Cause, and MAS) advocating voting against the December 2 constitutional referendum convoked a poorly attended but peaceful march November 10 in Caracas. According to local press reports, only 10,000 persons participated the demonstration. Turnout for the demonstration was likely affected by well attended student-led demonstrations November 7 and November 1 (Reftel). Memorial services for former president and COPEI member Luis Herrera Campins, who passed away November 9, likely kept many potential participants away. Live television coverage of the event showed that the mood among participants was generally festive. March participants carried banners that read, "No to Violence, No to the Reform," or donned shirts with the phrase "Vote No" in an effort to boost participation rates in the upcoming election. A number of parties formally registered with the National Electoral Council (CNE) as part of the "No" bloc, such as Accion Democratica, did not participate in the march. (Note: Political parties and movements wishing to campaign for or against the reform package were required to register with the CNE as either part of the "No" or "Yes" bloc. End Note.)

Opposition Figures Make Way for Students

13. (SBU) Although opposition parties advocating voting "No" convoked the street action, emerging leaders within the university student movement generated more public attention. According to local media reports, Manuel Rosales, Un Nuevo Tiempo leader and Zulia state governor, attempted to rally march participants but failed to garner audience feedback. Conversely, four university student leaders, including Freddy Guevara of the Andres Bello Catholic University (UCAB) and leader of the UNT's youth wing, rallied the crowd when they called for "unity" among the anti-reform movement. Despite speaking at an event geared at getting out the "No" vote, student leaders continued to advocate for postponement of the referendum. We also understand that many university students stayed away from the November 10 "No" rally to avoid "tainting" the student movement in the public's mind with traditional opposition parties.

Conflicting Messages

14. (C) Currently the general opposition to the reform package is composed of three main groups, each promoting a different message and a different end. Opposition university students, for instance, want to postpone the referendum until February 2008 in order to allow voters time to review the proposed changes. Abstentionists, however, have called for "civic resistance" in an effort to persuade the government not to hold the referendum. Lastly, a loose coalition of opposition political parties are calling on voters to go to the polls and vote "No." While each group is capable of organizing noteworthy Caracas rallies, their competing efforts may be inadvertently contributing to march fatigue and only further dividing the opposition.

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Comment

15. (C) Student participation at the opposition-convoked march appears to have produced mixed results for march organizers. On the one hand, it is likely that student participation lured in a larger crowd than if the march was only led by opposition figures. On the other hand, student leaders did not specifically call on voters to vote "No," but rather reiterated their call for postponement of the vote. The student movement's middle-of-the-road position highlights the difficulty of reconciling the divergent positions that characterize the anti-reform movement.

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